European Union Politics

The struggle over dimensionality: A note on theory and empirics
Catherine E. De Vries and Gary Marks

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:
$SAGE

Additional services and information for *European Union Politics* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://eup.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://eup.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - May 23, 2012

What is This?

The struggle over dimensionality: A note on theory and empirics

Catherine E. De Vries
University of Geneva, Switzerland
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Gary Marks
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA
VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Dylan on dimensionality: The significance of political labeling

On Friday, 13 December 1963, the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee (NECLC)[1] organized their annual Bill of Rights dinner in order to present a distinguished individual with its Tom Paine Award. That night, the award was given to a young singer-songwriter dressed in a suede jacket and a pair of blue jeans, attire that starkly contrasted with the furs, pearls, and bow ties worn by the mostly wealthy and elderly liberal NECLC ranks. In his controversial acceptance speech Bob Dylan declared his political independence by stating: 'There's no black and white, left and right to me anymore; there's only up and down and down is very close to the ground. And I'm trying to go up without thinking about anything trivial such as politics.'[2] By 1963, Dylan had become a symbol of the New Left and the Civil Rights Movement, a role that made him uncomfortable. Interestingly, Dylan used two distinct terms to demonstrate his political autonomy; he no longer wanted to be associated with the 'left' or the 'right'. These labels are clearly not Dylan's inventions nor are they merely a vestigial homage to the seating arrangement in the French Estates General of 1789 where supporters of the Ancien Régime sat to the right of the Assembly president and supporters of the revolution to his left.[3] The terms 'left' and 'right' have come to identify distinct historical traditions, different conceptions of the good society, and alternative lifestyles. In the contemporary world, political scientists, politicians, journalists, and voters have come to associate broad streams of ideas with the terms 'left' and 'right'. Although the left–right dimension is

Corresponding author:
Prof. Catherine E. De Vries, Chair in Political Behavior, Département de Science Politique et Relations Internationales, University of Geneva, 40 Boulevard du Pont d'Arve, CH-1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland
Email: catherine.devries@unige.ch

sometimes referred to as the 'ideological super-issue' – that is, the dimension that bundles the issues that happen to be salient in a society (Pierce, 1999: 30; see also Gabel and Huber, 2000; McDonald and Budge, 2005) – its poles contrast a more progressive and redistributive role for the state to a more conservative and market-oriented role. Dylan's unease with the labels 'left' and 'right' has resonance with the uncertainty of political scientists about the value of 'left' and 'right' as radical simplifications of political actors' positions within a political space. The conceptualization and measurement of the dimensionality of political space and the positions of parties and voters within that space lie at the heart of a science of politics and constitute the topic of this special issue.

Estimating dimensionality: A priori and a posteriori methods

In recent years, the debate concerning the structure of political competition has intensified, especially among political science scholars studying Europe. Is political space in European polities (both East and West) best described as unidimensional? Or is left–right contestation over the role of the state in the economy now accompanied by a new and independent cultural divide pitting nationalists and cultural conservatives against cosmopolitans and cultural libertarians (Benoit and Laver, 2006; Dalton, 1996; Inglehart et al., 1991; Kriesi et al., 2008)? The political science literature explaining the dimensionality of political competition goes back at least to Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan's (1967) pioneering work on cleavage structures. Lipset and Rokkan's theory of social cleavages hypothesizes how macro developments – the national revolution, the Reformation, and the Industrial Revolution – produce enduring structures of conflict that shape political structure, political organization, and the substantive character of conflict. Cleavages arise to the extent that social structure – chiefly, occupation, religion, and spatial location – determines political preferences.

An implication of this is that new generations of citizens may not find a place in frozen party systems once 'decades of structural change and economic growth have made the old, established alternatives increasingly irrelevant' (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967: 54). Indeed, the links between social structure and political preferences that Lipset and Rokkan diagnosed in 1967 appear much looser today (Franklin et al., 1992). Models of political competition that conceive stable electorates strongly tied to specific parties through deeply rooted social divisions (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) are no longer accurate depictions of political competition. Political scientists face the challenge of estimating and explaining actor positioning in a volatile political space that is unhinged from its traditional sociological moorings.

There are two methodological approaches to this conundrum (see Benoit and Laver, 2012). The first is the deductive method in which researchers derive issue dimensions from theory in advance of measurement. Lipset and Rokkan's 1967 paper is an example of this method. The alternative is an inductive approach in which the researcher frames a dataset from which dimensions can be inferred.

Prior measurements of party or public stances on an array of issues are used as indicators to produce latent constructs which the researcher then interprets. Much recent work on party competition follows an inductive approach (Bakker et al., 2012; Laver et al., 2003; Slapin and Proksch, 2007).

Both approaches are theoretically guided. The deductive or a priori approach makes initial assumptions about dimensionality that may then be tested; the inductive or a posteriori approach makes more or less explicit assumptions about the composition of issues that produce dimensions. The problem is not that issues and dimensions are not physical objects. Confirming or disconfirming a hypothesis involves observation, and all observation is theoretically impregnated whether it is observation of a physical object or observation of a non-physical object (Lakatos, 1970). The fact that one can observe an object 'with one's own eyes' does not make it easier to hypothesize about. Rather, the problem is that, as Benoit and Laver (2012) emphasize, dimensional representations of issue spaces are like maps and should be evaluated in terms of their use-value as well as their validity. It is possible to say that a map is wrong, but there are many maps that may be considered useful.

This special issue presents scientific work using both a priori and a posteriori methods to describe and interpret political dimensionality.

Theorizing dimensionality: Sociological and strategic approaches

A second distinction is between *sociological*, or bottom-up, approaches that explain dimensionality in terms of the fundamental conflicts in a society and *strategic*, or top-down, approaches that explain dimensionality in terms of party competition, the rules of the political game, and the benefits of reduction. As political preferences have become more volatile, theory has shifted away from political sociology to strategic competition, but both have their proponents.

The sociological approach is concerned chiefly with the substantive character of divisions in society and the probabilities that individuals with particular social characteristics will support one or the other political party. It starts from the Lipset–Rokkan premise that major conflicts are rooted in the historical experience of a society and that these have an intergenerational effect on the values and preferences of citizens. Voters have durable social characteristics, above all class, gender, education, and occupational status, that lead them to identify with certain political parties and not with others. The sociological approach conceives of political parties as programmatic organizations that mobilize and are responsive to ideologically self-selected activists and leaders as well as to voters. As a result, political parties have limited flexibility in responding to new issues that arise on the political agenda.

The strategic approach starts from the Schattschneiderian assumption that politics is a competitive struggle among political parties about which political issues come to dominate the political agenda (Schattschneider, 1960). In this approach,

parties are not vessels carrying societal divisions but actively structure and determine the content of societal conflict. As a result, the substantive character of political competition will vary from election to election as new issues are identified and mobilized by one party or another (see Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Riker, 1982).

Political parties politicize a previously non-salient event, policy issue, or societal conflict and attempt to gear up public attention over this controversy. Of course, they have to carefully choose which issue to mobilize and ensure that it resonates with people's livelihoods and interests. Nevertheless, within the strategic perspective, an issue is likely to structure the political debate only when a political party or candidate gives it political expression (see De Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Stimson et al., 2012). Introducing a new issue involves risk because it 'is capable of subtracting more voters than it adds' (Stimson et al., 2012: 293). Consequently, a political party will seek to reduce political issues to the dimension on which it has a competitive advantage (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012; see also Rovny, 2012).[4]

In short, sociological and strategic approaches direct our attention to different sources of dimensionality. The sociological approach roots dimensions in the social divisions that arise in the course of historical development. The strategic approach conceives dimensions as reflecting party competition about the salience of issues as they arise on the political agenda.

Searching for dimensionality: A typology

The four-fold matrix in Figure 1 combines the choice between a priori and a posteriori methods with the theoretical alternatives of sociological and strategic approaches to dimensionality.

The Lipset–Rokkan theory of cleavages can be understood as an a priori *sociological* approach to dimensionality. It explains variation in cleavage structures across European societies deductively by examining patterns of conflict among elite actors in the course of the national revolution, the Reformation, and the Industrial Revolution. Kitschelt and Rehm (2006) and Oesch (2006) theorize dimensions of conflict for contemporary democracies and then place actors on these dimensions according to their occupational location and workplace skills. Kriesi et al. (2006, 2008) frame a two-dimensional framework – an economic left–right dimension and a cultural dimension dividing the losers and winners from globalization – but use inductive empirical approaches (including multidimensional scaling) to determine the content of these dimensions.

Carmines and Stimson's theory of issue evolution is an example of a deductive top-down approach. The authors define, a priori, changes in the dimensionality of the American political space from the 1960s onwards and highlight the role of political parties in bringing about that change (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). Stimson et al. (2012) mix deductive and inductive approaches to dimensionality in France. They begin by estimating dimensionality inductively by examining a large array of policy items over several decades. They then categorize issues as

Figure 1. A typology of dimensionality of political space.

economic left–right or sociocultural to assess the association between these a priori dimensions.

Similar approaches have also been used to examine party competition over European integration and political dimensionality in the European Parliament (EP). Hix and his colleagues (2006) inductively analyze roll-call votes to uncover the dimensions of political competition within the EP. They find a left–right dimension, similar to that in national politics, and a weaker second dimension relating to European integration. Proksch and Slapin (2009; Slapin and Proksch, 2010) use a similar inductive approach to analyze party positioning in EP debates.

When it comes to the positions of national parties on European issues, deductive sociological approaches, and combinations with strategic ones, are more frequent. Evans and Whitefield (1998) analyze the dimensionality of political conflict in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as the result of the contemporary challenges faced by these states leavened by historically rooted cleavages. Marks and his colleagues (2002) examine how longstanding ideological commitments are a prism through which parties perceive new issues such as European integration.

Method and theory are in principle independent but there are some affinities. Sociological approaches theorize dimensionality as the outcome of historical episodes or conflicts. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) do this, and they are followed in this respect by Kriesi et al. (2008) and Kitschelt and Rehm (2006). This line of research almost always hypothesizes two dimensions, and almost never a single dimension. Strategic approaches are usually open-textured with respect to the substantive content of conflict, but have a strong prior concerning the simplifying consequences of

elite competition. For example, rational choice theorists argue that the dimension-
ality of political space is largely a consequence of characteristics of the strategic
environment in which parties operate, most notably electoral institutions (Cox,
1997; Duverger, 1959). Hence, in contrast to the political sociology of dimension-
ality, research within the strategic tradition detects a single dimension, or one-plus
dimensions (see Downs, 1957).

Content of special issue: Seven essays on dimensionality

So, how can one describe the political space in Europe? Can voters and political
parties be located with reasonable precision on one, two, or more dimensions? And
how can one explain variation in the number of dimensions and their substantive
content?

   The contributions in this special issue advance a variety of methods to probe
these questions. The first paper, by Benoit and Laver (2012), is concerned with the
conceptualization and measurement of dimensionality. The following papers the-
orize about how dimensionality and positioning on issues vary across countries or
over time.

   The contribution by Benoit and Laver engages basic epistemological questions
that arise when one conceptualizes and measures dimensionality. They do so by
drawing our attention to a revealing and instructive example: the Central and
Circle lines of the London Underground. Dimensional maps, such as the
Underground map, should be evaluated against the purpose for which they are
designed. The authors then illustrate the potential risks arising from inductive
estimation of dimensions in the European Parliament.

   The article by Bakker, Jolly and Polk (2012) maps the dimensionality of party
competition across 24 countries using Chapel Hill expert survey (CHES) data. The
authors find that the political space in most countries can be characterized as three-
dimensional, consisting of an economic left/right, a social left/right, and a pro-/
anti-EU dimension. That being said, there is considerable cross-national variation
in how these three dimensions relate to one another. Given this substantial dispar-
ity in the relationships within this three-dimensional space, the authors present a
new measure of dimensional complexity that allows researchers to capture the
interrelatedness between the economic left/right, a social left/right, and a pro-/
anti-EU dimension.

   The article by De Vries and Hobolt (2012) deals with the question of how and
why new issue dimensions are successfully introduced. Building on the analysis of
issue evolution in the United States, these authors suggest that 'political losers' in
the party system can advance their position by introducing a new issue dimension.
This strategy of issue entrepreneurship – that is, the attempt to restructure political
competition by mobilizing a previously non-salient issue dimension – allows polit-
ical losers to attract new voters. By examining issue entrepreneurship in the context
of party conflict over European integration, De Vries and Hobolt show that, based
on concerns related to European integration, voters are more likely to cast their

ballot for parties occupying losing positions on the dominant dimension of political competition than for parties holding advantageous positions. What is more, the authors demonstrate that parties employing an issue entrepreneurial strategy on European integration reap clear electoral benefits.

Rovny's (2012) contribution explores how the multidimensionality of political spaces affects the strategies of political parties. The author argues that it is rational for a party to disguise its stance on one dimension by blurring its positioning, while emphasizing its position on another issue dimension. The paper investigates the incidence of emphasis and blurring through a cross-sectional analysis of 132 political parties in 14 West European party systems using Comparative Manifesto Project data, the 2006 CHES, and the 2009 European Election Study.

The article by Stimson, Thiébaut and Tiberj (2012) extends the issue evolution perspective developed in the United States to the mood of public opinion in France from 1973 to the present. The space of party competition in France is much more fragmented than in the United States, yet the authors find that French public opinion is characterized by low dimensionality – more than one dimension but fewer than two. Using an algorithm that builds a single time-series from the available surveys, they find evidence for a thermostatic logic: the public demands more leftist policies when the right is in power, and more rightist policies when the left is in power.

The special issue concludes with a forum piece by Proksch and Lo (2012) that explores the dimensionality of party positioning on European integration and a response by Marks et al. (2012). Proksch and Lo argue that the dimension of European integration is weakly continuous because it is more difficult to estimate the positions of moderate and pro-integration parties than of Eurosceptic parties. Comparing the 2002 CHES data set with the 2003 Benoit–Laver expert data set and the 2006 CHES data set with voter placements of political parties generated by the 2009 European Election Study, they make a case for treating party positioning on European integration as bimodal.

In their response, Marks, Steenbergen and Hooghe (2012) cross-validate the CHES data across terciles of the European integration dimension and explore the reliability of the expert judgments. They examine the continuity of the dimension and re-evaluate the case for dichotomizing party positions.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. An organization founded in 1951 as the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee (ECLC) by more than 150 persons for the purpose of mobilizing public opinion in support of the traditional American constitutional guarantees of civil liberties in response to the

'prosecution' of left-wing liberals in the McCarthy era. In 1998 the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee was merged into the Center for Constitutional Rights (for more information, see http://ccrjustice.org/).

2. This is a segment of Bob Dylan's acceptance speech. To view the entire speech, see http://www.corliss-lamont.org/dylan.htm.

3. In the words of one of the deputies, Baron de Gauville: 'We began to recognize each other: those who were loyal to religion and the king took up positions to the right of the chair so as to avoid the shouts, oaths, and indecencies that enjoyed free rein in the opposing camp' (Gauchet, 1997: 242).

4. See also Schattschneider (1960: 64): 'There are billions of potential conflicts in any modern society, but only a few become significant. The reduction of the number of conflicts is an essential part of politics.'

References

Bakker R, Jolly S and Polk P (2012) Complexity in the European party space: Exploring dimensionality with experts. *European Union Politics* 13(2): 219–245.

Benoit K and Laver M (2006) *Party Policy in Modern Democracies*. London: Routledge.

Benoit K and Laver M (2012) The dimensionality of political space: Epistemological and methodological considerations. *European Union Politics* 13(2): 194–218.

Carmines EG and Stimson JA (1989) *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Princeton University Press.

Cox G (1997) *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems (Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dalton RJ (1996) *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House.

De Vries CE and Hobolt SB (2012) When dimensions collide: The electoral success of issue entrepreneurs. *European Union Politics* 13(2): 246–268.

Downs A (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper.

Duverger M (1959) *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*. New York: Wiley.

Evans G and Whitefield S (1998) The structuring of political cleavages in post-communist societies: The case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *Political Studies* 46: 115–139.

Franklin M, Mackie T and Valen H (eds) (1992) *Electoral Change: Responses to Evolving Social and Attitudinal Structures in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gabel MJ and Huber J (2000) Putting parties in their place. *American Journal of Political Science* 44: 94–103.

Gauchet M (1997) Right and left. In: Pierre N and Kritzman LD (eds) *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 242–245.

Hix S, Noury A and Roland G (2006) Does left/right structure party positions on European integration? *American Journal of Political Science* 50(2): 494–511.

Inglehart R, Rabier J-R and Reif K (1991) The evolution of public attitudes toward European integration: 1970–1986. *Journal of European Integration* 10: 135–155.

Kitschelt H and Rehm P (2006) New social risk and political preferences. In: Armingeon K and Bonoli G (eds) *The Politics of Post-Industrial Welfare States*. London: Routledge, 52–82.

Kriesi H, Grande E, Lachat R, Dolezal M, Bornschier S and Frey T (2006) Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: Six European countries compared. *European Journal of Political Research* 45: 921–956.

Kriesi H, Grande E, Lachat R, Dolezal M, Bornschier S and Frey T (2008) *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lakatos I (1970) Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes. In: Lakatos I and Musgrave A (eds) *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 91–196.

Laver M, Benoit K and Garry J (2003) Extracting policy positions from political texts using words as data. *American Political Science Review* 97: 311–332.

Lazarsfeld P, Berelson B and Gaudet H (1944) *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lipset SM and Rokkan S (1967) Cleavage structures, party systems and voter alignments: An introduction. In: Lipset SM and Rokkan S (eds) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. New York: Free Press, 1–64.

McDonald MD and Budge I (2005) *Elections, Parties, Democracy: Conferring the Median Mandate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marks G, Steenbergen M and Hooghe L (2012) To dichotomize or not to dichotomize? *European Union Politics* 13(2): 334–339.

Marks G, Wilson CJ and Ray L (2002) National political parties and European integration. *American Journal of Political Science* 46(3): 585–594.

Oesch D (2006) Coming to grips with a changing class structure: An analysis of employment stratification in Britain, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland. *International Sociology* 21: 263–288.

Pierce R (1999) Mass–elite issue linkages and the responsible party model of representation. In: Miller W, Pierce R, Thomassen J, Herrera R, Holmberg S, Esaiasson P and Weßels B (eds) *Policy Representation in Western Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 9–32.

Proksch S-O and Lo J (2012) Forum Section: Reflections on the European integration dimension. *European Union Politics* 13(2): 317–333.

Proksch S-O and Slapin JB (2009) Position taking in European Parliament speeches. *British Journal of Political Science* 40: 587–611.

Riker WH (1982) *Liberalism against Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co.

Rovny J (2012) Who emphasizes and who blurs? Party strategies in multidimensional competition. *European Union Politics* 13(2): 269–292.

Schattschneider EE (1960) *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Slapin J and Proksch S-O (2007) A scaling model for estimating time-series party positions from text. *American Journal of Political Science* 52: 702–755.

Slapin J and Proksch S-O (2010) Look who's talking: Parliamentary debate in the European Union. *European Union Politics* 11(3): 333–357.

Stimson JA, Thiébaut C and Tiberj V (2012) The evolution of policy attitudes in France. *European Union Politics* 13(2): 293–316.